**Social Protection and Social Security in the Arab Region**

*ESCWA’s Substantive input to the 10th Session of the General Assembly’s Open-Ended Working Group on Ageing*

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The Arab region is witnessing significant demographic changes. In addition to the youth bulge that has characterized the region’s demographic profile for decades, ageing has emerged as a new trend, exerting additional pressure on States as they struggle to meet the often-competing needs of different social groups. The number of older persons (aged 60+), currently close to 27 million, is projected to reach around 49.6 million by 2030 and surpass 100 million by 2050 (thus exceeding 15 per cent of the population). While ageing transition is approaching countries at different rates, the majority of Arab countries will begin this transition by 2040 and will complete the transition to an aged society rather quickly (an average time of 13-40 years). These demographic changes will undoubtedly have socio-economic impacts that States across the region are required to prepare for and address today, to ensure that people in the region can age with dignity.

While almost all Arab countries provide some form of social protection, the coverage and efficacy of those programs vary between countries and within the same country for older persons. The average pension coverage level for the Arab region does not exceed 30 per cent of the workforce, and ranges from a low of 5 per cent in the Sudan to a high of 63 per cent in Algeria. Low coverage rates are attributed to the large informal employment sector in the region – including the agricultural and domestic work sectors – but also to evasion of pension contributions. The limited pension coverage particularly affects women, the majority of whom are informally employed or unemployed.

Limited non-inclusive healthcare coverage results in elevated out of pocket expenditure, representing as high as 70 per cent of total health expenditures in some of the least developed countries. Public health programs have seen significant reductions in funding. Programs targeting active ageing, long term care, and ageing in place are sparse. Older persons face many obstacles limiting their inclusion, including the absence of age friendly transportation systems and few opportunities for productive socio-economic engagement. Thus, older persons in the Arab region face a high risk of vulnerability to ill health, isolation and poverty.

Against this backdrop, and in light of the advent of ageing, States across the region are compelled to take immediate action. Over the past few years, several States have started to develop ageing strategies and plans of action, such as in Iraq, Kuwait, the State of Palestine, the Sudan and Tunisia. However, States have expressed similar challenges facing their efforts to ensure older persons rights and address their needs. These include limited financial resources, weak coordination mechanisms that ensure an integrated approach to ageing issues, and limitations to accessing timely, reliable and disaggregated data that allow for evidence-based policy making.

To support States efforts, ESCWA focused the [8th issue of its Population and Development Report](https://www.unescwa.org/sites/www.unescwa.org/files/publications/files/population-development-report-8-english_0.pdf) on Ageing with dignity in the Arab Region. In addition to providing an overview of the demographic trends and patters, and an analysis of the socio-economic situation of older persons in the region, the report starts from the premise of the need to develop inclusive social protection and health coverage systems. It identifies several factors that would ensure success of such endeavors. These include adopting a human rights-based, life-course, people-centered approach to policy making; addressing health and income inequality especially in old age; ensuring an enabling environment; strengthening the role of social capital within comprehensive social protection systems; and the need for better data and evidence. It highlights the need for financing ageing policies and programs by working in a cost-effective manner, designing evidence-based intervention programmes, developing the necessary human resources, and strengthening cooperation within government and with society so as to pool resources.

The report also offers a policy road map that could guide policymakers over the short, medium and long term. Guided by the 2030 Agenda and other international policy frameworks, the policies recommended undertake the following:

* Ensure legislation is in place for a multisectoral approach to ageing that guarantees older persons’ human rights and social inclusion;
* Improve national and local pensions, benefits and cash-transfer schemes;
* Develop systems for long-term care provision;
* Generate and ring-fence adequate funding to expand social protection systems and ensure universal health and long-term care provision;
* Improve measurement, monitoring and understanding of the situation of older persons and their caregivers;
* Build and maintain a sustainable and well-trained health and long-term care workforce;
* Ensure the representation of older persons and their informal caregivers in the decision-making process;
* Create age-friendly environments.

To read the full details of the policy roadmap, you can access the Population and Development Report through this [link](https://www.unescwa.org/sites/www.unescwa.org/files/publications/files/population-development-report-8-english_0.pdf).